TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

«SCIENCE FICTION AND THE VICTORIAN CRISIS OF FAITH: SECULARIZATION OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVES IN H.G. WELLS' *THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR MOREAU* (1896) AND *THE WAR OF THE WORLDS* (1898)»

Autor: ALFONSO OLMO GUTIÉRREZ

Tutor: RAFAEL GALÁN MOYA

GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Curso Académico 2019-2020

Fecha de presentación 01/06/2020

FACULTAD DE FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS

Abstract

In this study we will analyze H.G. Wells' science-fictional works *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and their secularization of Biblical narratives and tropes with the intention of disclosing the latent ideological conflicts which underly these works and their relation to the Victorian crisis of faith; testing the hypothesis that this religious crisis had a definite impact in the development of the speculative novel.

Keywords: Victorian crisis of faith, secularization, science fiction, Biblical narratives.

Resumen

En este trabajo analizaremos las obras de ciencia ficción de H.G. Wells *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) y *The War of the Worlds* (1898) y sus secularizaciones de narrativas y temas bíblicos con la intención de identificar y describir los conflictos ideológicos que subyacen a dichas obras y su conexión con el fenómeno de la crisis de fe victoriana; poniendo a prueba la hipótesis de que esta crisis tuvo un determinado impacto en el desarrollo de la novela especulativa.

Palabras clave: crisis de fe victoriana, secularización, ciencia ficción, narrativas bíblicas.

Introduction

We live a rapidly and incessantly changing world. In the course of less than a century and a half, it has experienced phenomena which have transformed it forever: two World Wars, revolutionary scientific discoveries, the consolidation of capitalism and its shift towards a consumer-based economy; the phenomenon of globalization and its consequences; the rise of terrorism; climatic crisis; the development of technology, with the "digital revolution", the spread of the internet and the emergence of artificial intelligence, etc.

Amid such radical and turbulent changes, the artistic and literary landscape of the western world has been radically transformed as well. Influenced by and actively participating in this tide of social and political changes, new aesthetic and technical features, tropes and theories have transformed the way we produce and understand literature and the arts.

In short, if we were able to put our contemporary western world in front of a mirror, we would be able to observe that it differs radically from what it was in previous – though not too distant – ages of western history.

One of the main dimensions which set us "apart" from such previous ages of western history is our experience of religious faith. In previous historical ages, religion – both as an organized institution and a set of spiritual beliefs – was an unquestioned cornerstone of western civilization, an inextricable part of social and political life and the main source of our metaphysical understanding of reality. Almost 150 years have passed since Friedrich Nietzsche's famous declaration of the "death of God", and, certainly, as Eagleton (viii) notes, religion has not disappeared or lost its influence altogether in the western world; in fact, we have recently experienced, this author claims, "his [God's] dramatic reappearance in our own supposedly faithless age". Nevertheless, when juxtaposed to previous ages of our history, we observe that the position and power of religion have been definitely shaken in the face of the different challenges it has confronted since – particularly –, as LeDrew (73-74) notes, the 18th and 19th centuries.

Today we live, as Lyons (124) argues, in a world which is "neither religious nor secularized", but within what Taylor calls an "immanent frame" (542), a frame within which those who retain their beliefs in God or the transcendent coexist with those who deny the existence of the Spirit

and assert the independence of the workings of material reality; a world which radically differs from the hegemonically religious eras which have preceded it in that "unbelief emerges as a viable option, and both religious and irreligious perspectives are subject to 'cross-pressures' and mutual 'fragilisation'" (Lyons 125). Faith has not disappeared, but the environment in which it develops is now "disputed territory": it has to coexist with scientific accounts of the workings of material reality, philosophical arguments about the social origins of religious faith (LeDrew 78) and the different forms of unbelief which result from the myriad of contestations to traditional religious postulates.

Changing social, political and intellectual conditions have often been studied in relation to literary production, disclosing links between social or intellectual, and artistic sensibilities. For instance, modernist narrative modulations of time have been analyzed by scholars in close relationship to particular scientific developments of the 20th century, such as the development of quantum physics or Einstein's relativity. Thus, we find academic works such as Paul Tolliver Brown's article "Relativity, Quantum Physics, and Consciousness in Virginia Woolf's To *the Lighthouse"* (2009), in which a connection of this kind is established.

Given this historically unprecedented social, intellectual and political phenomenon, in which what has been – virtually since the dawn of history – the dominant authoritative grand narrative in the explanation of reality has seen its status as absolute truth contested and shaken, particular questions arise: could we speak about a definite influence of the conflicts around religious narratives taking place since the dawn of the late modern period and the increasing impact of new secular conceptions of reality upon the modern literary landscape? Have secularization and religious unrest been influential factors in the configuration of cultural and artistic productions? Can literature speak to us about these conflicts around organized religion and religious faith which have helped to configure our contemporary world? These are the chief questions around which our project revolves.

Following the "historicist" or "contextualist" paradigm which, as Joseph North claims, has governed literary studies since the 1980s (1), we intend to study literary texts with the intention of disclosing the ways in which they project latent conflicts around organized religion and religious faith of the time in which they were produced, when facing the challenges of the modern world.

When carrying out a study from this perspective, it must be noted that such conflicts around organized religion and religious belief are not an exclusive phenomenon of our recent contemporary history, but rather unleashed "at the outset of modernity" (Hyman 30), as we will observe. Focusing on England and its literature, there is a wide academic consensus around the fact that it is in the 19th century that we find, as Elizabeth M. Sanders claims, the outbreak of a considerable and historically unprecedented contestation to religion and its narratives: the Victorian crisis of faith (3).

Taking this into account, and given the intensity of the debates and conflicts taking place in this period, as we will see later, Victorian literature, – particularly that produced in the late 19th century – may prove singularly useful in our study.

Specifically, we will focus on science-fiction novels. During this century, new aesthetic sensibilities started to settle within the western literary landscape. One of the main instances of this fact is the development of speculative fiction; that is, of science-fiction and fantasy. Stories of mad scientists, space travel, or extraterrestrial invasions are today taken for granted as usual tropes in artistic production. However, when they appeared in the 19th century, they brought the "enchantment" of a literary form – the novel – "invented during the "Age of Reason"" and "designed specifically for realism" (Sanders 3). In works of such bourgeoning tradition, therefore, some scholars argue, we find the convergence of "the wide range of discourses that inform contemporary society" (Simkins 10).

Although radically innovative in their tropes and their transformation of the form of the novel, science-fictional works of the Victorian period drew heavily from diverse textual sources, such as works from the literary tradition, or – as in the case of our study – the Bible.

The Bible has been a major source of influence for literary authors, whose intertextual connections can be found in literature from virtually every period of western history. Science fiction is no exception. As we will observe, this was also a major source in the construction of science-fictional plots in the works of H.G. Wells, considered by some the "father" of science fiction (Sanders 13).

As some scholars such as Simon J. James have pointed out (459), authors of science-fiction novels during this period often drew upon Biblical narratives and tropes due to the familiarity

of 19th-century popular audiences with this religious text, which thus provided them with familiar forms of addressing their readership and even transmitting their moral and political messages.

However, there are works of this tradition which, in their adoption and modulation of Biblical elements, tropes and narratives, construct plots which feature underlying ideological conflicts around religion, and emerge as embedded within the social and intellectual turmoil taking place during this period.

Indeed, in some of the works of H.G. Wells we find a set of aesthetic and ideological narrative features through which conflicts and anxieties surrounding the phenomenon of the crisis of faith can be identified. In particular, we will focus on two of his most influential scientific romances: *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898). Both of these novels work upon what we will call a secularization of Biblical narratives and tropes. Through an analysis of such secularizations, we will try to identify the latent ideological conflicts and social anxieties which underlie their narrative constructions.

Recently, these relationships between religion, secularization and literary production have received increased critical attention; particularly, in studies of the science-fiction genre. Recent publications on the subject include Elizabeth M. Sanders' study of the relationship between the crisis of faith and the emergence and development of "speculative fiction"; Jennifer Simkins's analysis of science fiction as a literary mode which reworks diverse mythic forms and discourses of contemporary society; or Michael Rectenwald's study of 19th-century British secularism and its relationship with literature from this period.

In the first section of this study, we will offer an outline of the Victorian crisis of faith and contemporary perspectives on its influence upon our modern culture, as well as a revision of academic perspectives on the relationship between religious unrest and literary production.

Section two will be devoted to the critical analysis of our selected literary works, beginning with *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and its secularization of Genesis and other Christian tropes, followed by our analysis of *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and its secularization of Apocalypse.

Through these analyses, we will test the hypothesis that the Victorian crisis of faith was a determining factor in the configuration of works within this influential literary tradition, as well as the idea that literature from after the outbreak of this crisis can speak to us about the conflicts, anxieties and reconfigurations taking place in the modern western world as a result of the decline of the narratives which have dominated it throughout history.

The Victorian Crisis of Faith

The term "Victorian crisis of faith" is one which is widely present within interdisciplinary studies of this historical period. As Elizabeth M. Sanders argues, this term:

> refers to a vast number of changes in organized religion, scientific knowledge, ethical philosophies and theologies, rejections of Christianity and reconversions, and, in particular, literary expressions of these events. (6)

Using this terminology, scholars from different fields have studied the turmoil unleashed around organized religion and religious belief during the 19th century. Both its causes and its outcomes were widely varied, as we will observe.

Religious doubt, in fact, is not a phenomenon with origins in the 19th century. As Gavin Hyman points out: "at the outset of modernity, minds in England and France are beginning to be afflicted and plagued with doubts" (30). The successive and rapidly growing scientific discoveries taking place in the late modern period are commonly cited as one of the main causes of such spiritual and social crisis. In this respect, it is particularly in the 18th century that we find the roots that paved the way for the outbreak of this Victorian crisis. It was by the 18th century, Stephen LeDrew argues, that "science had rejected the notion of a static universe with laws generated by God in favor of a view that accepted nature as a product of great revolutionary transformations over an immense period of time" (73).

This rejection, that started to displace religious concepts of divine design as irrelevant for the explanation of Nature and the universe, as LeDrew notes (73), caused a theological revolution, rather than constituting external challenges to religious doctrines. As science started to gain prominence as a means of explanation and description of the workings and origins of Nature, the universe, and material reality as a whole – something which had traditionally been one of the main functions of religion and its narratives – theological currents arose which demanded a

form of theism built around rationalist critique instead of the doctrines of Revelation; a shift that required deep changes in theological thought, in order to make God "an object that could be investigated scientifically" (LeDrew 73). These religious "revolutions" cleared the path for the rise of atheism and other forms of religious denial. As Buckley argues, "[a] theism built upon the discoveries of science eventually generated its own negation" (42). Thus, the rise of forms of theism which conceived God as "a natural entity amenable to scientific investigation" was doomed to give way to forms of religious denial, as they failed "to demonstrate his role in nature, but rather seemed to demonstrate more and more that the concept of God was not required to explain nature" (LeDrew 74).

Regarding scientific developments, therefore, the 18th century was decisive in the configuration of this socio-cultural turmoil. However, it was during the 19th century that such developments and discoveries acquired wider status and started constituting deeper and more groundbreaking challenges to religion and its narratives. Particularly, the work which is most often cited as a turning point in the unfolding of this crisis is Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859).

Stephen LeDrew points out that this work was not only "one of the most significant events in the history of science", but also possibly "the most significant event in the history of atheism" (75). By providing a solid argument to build an answer to the question of the existence of life, a question which throughout history had been answered through resort to Divine intervention, Darwin's thesis "provided atheism with an answer to the lacuna that had plagued it for centuries" (75).

Darwin's theses, however, as some scholars argue, were not fully the product of an individual genius, but the culmination of a series of discoveries in the realm of the natural sciences that started to lay the foundations for a rejection of the idea of Nature as a product of divine design. As Sanders claims, "new disciplines like geology and paleontology gave rise to troubling discoveries well before Darwin's 1859 masterpiece" (8). Others, such as J. Jeffrey Franklin, maintain that the theory of natural selection was probably not the most important and determining scientific factor in the contestation of religious narratives. He calls attention to the development of modern thermodynamics, "in a series of groundbreaking statements by physicists in Germany and England between 1840 and 1850" (9); arguing that "[s]tatements about the impossibility of creating or destroying matter, the fixed amount of available energy in the universe, and entropy appeared to preclude external – divine – intervention" (9).

Despite the importance of these scientific developments, science and its discoveries were not the only factors in conflict with religion and its narratives during the 19th century. According to LeDrew (70), during this period there was a split within atheism and religious doubt, producing two distinct streams of religious criticism. One of these streams was the one opened by science, led by Darwinism, as we have already observed. However, there was also a "humanistic" position, connected with the emergence of the social sciences and fueled by the German philosophers Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx. This "split", however, must not be considered as producing distinct and mutually exclusive approaches. In fact, the humanistic approach assumed the theses of scientific religious criticism and extended them by making connections between the religious phenomenon and diverse social matters. This approach emerged, LeDrew argues (78), out of the Enlightenment's failure to address what thinkers of this position considered the "non-rational sources of religious belief", which include "alienation, suffering, infantile neurosis and insecurity, and fear of death". Therefore, their task was to disclose "the divine as a projection of alienation and suffering".

Another of the non-scientific sources of this religious upheaval is the "Higher Criticism" of the study of the Bible. This "impulse to apply historical method to biblical study" was closely tied, according to Scott, to "a cultural ethos very largely shaped by Darwinian thought" (271), and co-operated with it to call into question the belief that "the Scriptures present an infallible revelation of absolutely reliable truth [...]" (271).

These are the major factors among which scholars agree – to a certain extent – that a religious turmoil was unleashed during the 19th century. Nevertheless, this is a narrative that does not escape uncontested. Many scholars have questioned the accuracy of its claims, raising objections about its supposed partiality and excessiveness.

Timothy Larsen is one of these scholars; he claims that the crisis of faith "is a motif that has become vastly overblown" in different fields of academic study, even though he recognizes that "there really was a nineteenth-century crisis (or crises) of faith" (1).

Lyons (124) argues that this narrative has progressively lost credibility when presented as a set of flat conflicts which ignore that religion is an "elusive and multifaceted phenomenon"; a

"crudely triumphalist" narrative based on a vision of history as "a progressive march of reason, wherein we lose the childish illusions of religion as we acquire adult knowledge of reality".

Certainly, loss of faith was not a generalized phenomenon during the 19th century, and Christianity did not lose its social and political influence altogether, although it was definitely shaken. Rather, the Victorian period brought about a landscape in which different challenges to established faith converged in a historically unprecedented way, changing the experience of spirituality in a way never before seen in western history. This was a period in which a considerable number of intellectual voices began to speak openly about their unbelief and engage in discussions about the veracity of religious narratives, the workings of organized religion, the existence of the divine, etc. Even if unbelief didn't become the predominant stance, we must take into consideration that, as Sanders says:

> The crisis of faith is one of the many ways that the Victorians began building an essential part of modern culture that we take for granted; today, the awareness of unbelief as a viable alternative colors the faith of most Christian believers, certainly those in the Western world that inherited much of Victorian culture. This increasing possibility for doubt and ultimately for living a personal life without religion, then, is what I mean by the secularization of Victorian Britain – a shift felt not in a lack of church and chapel construction, or in a sharp decrease in worship attendance, but rather in the new challenges to the mind and heart that faced those who continued in their Christian faith. (11)

As Lyons argues (124), "modernity is neither religious nor secularized", but, as Rectenwald describes, an "abiding tensile condition comprising the coexistence of the religious and the secular within a common frame" (8), which Taylor calls the "immanent frame" (542). This, as Lyons notes (124-5), is a frame within which those which retain their beliefs in God or the transcendent and those who reject the existence of the spirit coexist. This marks our era as one which radically differs from the hegemonically religious eras which have preceded it in that "unbelief emerges as a viable option, and both religious and irreligious perspectives are subject to 'cross-pressures' and mutual 'fragilisation'".

In short, almost 150 years after Friedrich Nietzsche's famous declaration of the "death of God", as Eagleton notes, religion has not disappeared, God has survived (viii). Nevertheless, the landscape in which faith is developed today, and since the 19th century, is a radically different one from that of previous ages of western history: since this period, as we have observed,

religious faith and its narratives have had to coexist with scientific accounts of the workings and origins of material reality, philosophical inquiries about the origins of faith, different forms of unbelief, etc. In short, the status of religious postulates as monolithic absolute truths have since then been shattered and open to contestation.

Literature and the Crisis of Faith

For some decades now, literary studies have worked around a certain established consensus. Joseph North claims that, while they appear quite heterogeneous, Anglo-American literary studies have worked around what he calls a "historicist/contextualist paradigm" (1), by which he means that:

> almost all of the most influential movements in literary studies since the 1980s have proceeded on the assumption that, for academic purposes, works of literature are chiefly of interest as diagnostic instruments for determining the state of the cultures in which they were written or read. (North 1)

Following this approach, scholars have studied literary texts from different approaches, disclosing their relationship with historical, social and political matters such as Imperialism and its discourses, gender power relationships, etc. However, there is a dimension which has been generally overlooked within this paradigm in literary studies: that of the relationship between changing conceptions of spirituality and organized religion, and literature.

As we have illustrated in our discussion, a major social, political and cultural "revolution" took place in the 19th century, one which opened space for new conceptions of the world and existence, free from the dictates of religious discourses and narratives, as well as new political and sociological conceptions of religion and its relations with power: a crisis of faith. The way in which literature is embedded within such epistemological changes and how literary texts illustrate such deep cultural shifts has been a matter which, in general terms, has not been a central concern within academic literary studies.

Elizabeth M. Sanders is one of the few contemporary scholars which has paid a considerable attention to the question of the influence of western religious unsettlement upon culture and, more specifically, in the configuration of literary production. She provides a hypothesis which serves as a major theoretical framework to our analysis of Wells' science-fiction novels: that

"the restlessness of the religious atmosphere during the Victorian period has an intense connection to [the] rise of the speculative novel" (Sanders 13).

The Victorian crisis of faith is conceived by this author as a major cultural phenomenon, a decisive force in the shaping of modern culture until our days. The Victorian period, in fact, and as Sanders notes (1), was a hectic period in which many transformations were taking place in a variety of spheres: from science and technology, to education, the urban landscape, or Imperialism. Nevertheless, one of the most remarkable realms in which the Victorians were undergoing changes was "in their experience of religious faith".

In cultural terms, the Victorian era also was, according to this author, an age of deep transformation and change. During this period, particular literary innovations began to transform our western literary tradition. Especially remarkable was the fact that it was the Victorian era that saw the birth and development of what this author calls "speculative fiction", a term under which she groups 19th-century fantasy and science-fiction novels, since the distinctions between these genres were still not clearly identifiable, and given the fact that both of these literary traditions, taken together, illustrate how these varied innovative literary forms that moved away from realism engaged more acutely in questions related to the religious turmoil taking place during this century.

This period was the scene of a "rise" in the introduction of fantastical elements in the novel, a literary form designed during the Age of Reason, mostly to accommodate realism. Fantasy and science fiction, genres which today form an essential part of our cultural landscape, as Sanders notes (11), began to be developed during this period, when fantastical aesthetic elements and stories began to be extensively included in the novel, elements which in previous ages of western literary history had been more widely present in other forms like poetry, fairy tales, religious allegories or satires.

Inclusions of such speculative elements into the form of the novel, however, as Sanders argues (12), predate the Victorian period, as we observe, for instance, with the emergence of Gothic fiction in the 18th century. Horace Walpole and Matthew Lewis, with their works *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and *The Monk* (1796) introduced this modulation of the form of the novel in Britain. Nevertheless, it was particularly in the 19th century that science fiction and fantasy were introduced in a more familiar form and consolidated as part of the western literary landscape.

It was during this period that the fantastical and supernatural elements introduced by Gothic authors were extended beyond their classical settings – like castles – and started to be part of the construction of the aesthetics and archetypes that have defined the development of these genres until our days.

As we have observed earlier in our discussion, the religious beliefs and doctrines which had been central to understand existence and material reality in the western world for several centuries began to face groundbreaking challenges during the Victorian period. It is Sanders' hypothesis, as well as our own, that the crisis of faith which came as a result of these challenges "marks the literature of the period with varied reactions to an experience of religion that seemed permanently altered" (2); so that the development of science fiction and fantasy in the 19th century requires an analysis which explores the way in which these genres are linked to the religious unrest unleashed during this period. At a time when religious beliefs and the idea of spirit as a whole began facing new and historically unprecedented conflicts, our literary tradition began being transformed with the proliferation of speculative novels. These new forms of literary expression created a space through which, as we will observe, the transcendental social and intellectual conflicts taking place during this period start permeating literary production.

During the Victorian period, and as Sanders argues, Biblical postulates such as those about the age of the earth or the origins of humanity, life and material reality as a whole began being contested and displaced by alternative accounts which progressively took their place as authoritative narratives. This made reality be conceived as being in a constant hectic change, so that the future was rendered "incredibly unknowable" (15). Therefore, some of the literature produced during this period, and particularly speculative fiction, engaged in the search for answers in the face of this uncertainty, free from the constraints of realism, which allowed the introduction of new aesthetic and narrative elements through which some works of this period appear as permeated by this crisis that helped to configure our contemporary world.

H.G. Wells: Science Fiction and the Crisis of Faith

H.G. Wells is one of those late Victorian authors and intellectuals in whose fictional works we can appreciate latent conflicts around spirituality and organized religion, in the face of the new challenges it confronted within this hectic period.

Wells' works made use of, and established many of the tropes and archetypes which have marked the development of the science-fiction genre until our days. His writings, through fully imaginative plots and aesthetics such as Martian invasions and time travelling, are the space for social, political, scientific and spiritual speculation, including thematic concerns such as evolution, class struggle, and imperialism, among others.

However, there is a dimension to some of his scientific romances which has received little critical attention in comparison to some of these aforementioned aspects: their concern with the question of religious faith and organized religion, its struggles with science and its discoveries, its place in the modern world, etc.

This author, as will be argued through our analysis of two of his best-known scientific romances, engaged with these questions through what we will call from now onwards a secularization of Biblical narratives and tropes. These works rewrite certain Biblical narratives and tropes by placing them in purely secular contexts, stripping them of the intervention of superior divine entities, and setting them instead within wholly rationalist and materialist frameworks, in which the workings of reality are "dominated by natural law rather than the caprices of divine entities" (Davidson 40). Through these secularized narratives and tropes and their interaction with other narrative devices and ideological constructions, Wells' science-fiction novels inform us about the epistemological turmoil surrounding religious faith unleashed during the 19th century, as well as about the way in which changing conceptions of the divine had a definite influence upon artistic productions of the period, helping to shape and construct modern secular mythologies which have come to define our contemporary culture.

In fact, as Brett Davidson argues, "[s]cience fiction can arguably be described as a mythology transformed"; given the fact that myth "necessarily concerns the Cosmos and human status within it", as opposed to other narrative forms as epic, legends or fairy tales (40).

Jennifer Simkins supports this view of science fiction as a literary mode which generates "modern myths", as it creates speculative narratives which concern the Cosmos, its workings and our place within it. According to this author (10), this genre emerged as a response to the hectic and turbulent changes taking place during the 19th century, making use of and reworking the myriad of discourses which began to converge in modern western societies, which range from scientific theories, religious doctrines or political ideologies, to science fiction itself, which reworks all these discourses and mythic forms in its own production of modern myths.

However, according to Davidson, while myth "arises and operates in a cosmology dominated by divine maintenance and fiat", he argues that "science fiction – or at least Wellsian science fiction – generally expresses or addresses an opposite understanding of a materialistic and apparently Godless Cosmos" (49).

Wells, as we will see throughout this project, made use of the new literary space developed during the 19th century in which, as Sanders argues, "stories of the unrealistic" and "[f]antastical plot elements" entered the novel, a literary form seemingly designed for realism (11), in order to engage in the dialectic conflict between materialistic/scientific and religious discourses and their conceptions of the world and reality, the social implications of such conflict, the relationship between religious institutions and power structures, etc. His works display how agnostic, atheistic or secular minds reimagined the world through speculative literary texts as conceptions of Nature and the divine were being changed and transformed; showing how changing and conflicting conceptions of the divine and the secular were a determinant force influencing cultural productions in the Victorian era, and thus how such conflicting views began to be part of the popular imagination, giving shape to cultural productions which prefigure and influenced literary modes, traditions and archetypes of our contemporary world.

H.G. Wells' Secularization of Biblical Narratives

Genesis: *The Island of Doctor Moreau*

Genesis is one of the particular Biblical narratives which are secularized in H.G. Wells' science-fiction; secularizations through which some his texts become cultural artifacts illustrating conflicts around religion and the role such conflicts in the configuration of modern secular myths and archetypes. *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), one of his most popular works, features a narrative structure and a set of symbolic and allegorical elements and motifs through which this work appears as a "rewriting" of this Biblical narrative.

Rewritings of Genesis and creation stories from other mythological traditions are not unique to Wells or other particular authors, but have been recurrent throughout literary history. As Sanders (20) argues, within British Romanticism, for instance, we can find several examples of such rewritings, as William Blake's *The Book of Urizen* (1794).

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1823) joined this Romantic trend of rewriting creation stories, drawing heavily from diverse sources such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the myth of Prometheus (Marsh 148); introducing several changes to this trend through which, as Sanders notes (20), she established "one of the most recognizable images in Western popular culture": "Shelley wrote a novel rather than a long poem or closet drama, she set it in the recent rather than in the mythic past, and most memorably, she used science in the place of divine power as the tool of creation". Wells' work, in fact, seems to have been heavily influenced by Shelley's seminal science-fictional text, and its secular exploration of themes like knowledge and disobedience, or religious morality.

In *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, as well as in Shelley's work, the figure of a divine creator is replaced by the now archetypal figure of the mad scientist, which is key in the process of secularization.

In fact, the (mad) scientist is an archetypal figure which was extensively exploited by Wells, both in his short fiction and his scientific romances. This figure, in some of his works – as in the case at hand –, is used as an element for literary speculation on a wide range of matters, from the social, political and even spiritual spheres. *The Time Machine* (1895), one of his most popular novels, can be a good illustration of this fact. In this novel, the figure of the (mad)

scientist allows this author to speculate about evolution and the class divisions of late 19th century England. Through the Time Traveler and his voyage, Wells is able to construct a picture of a very distant future in which class division has caused the "split" of the human race into two different species: the working class has evolved into aggressive subterranean monsters and the bourgeoisie into ineffectual and powerless creatures.

In *The Island of Doctor Moreau,* through such a figure, Wells manages to secularize creation, by substituting it with a process of vivisection through which the scientist tries to modify animals into more "perfected", rational beings. The use of setting is also of a symbolic nature, as Penelope Quade states: "Wells sets up *The Island of Dr. Moreau* on a tropical island in the Pacific Ocean that mimics the lush surroundings of the Garden of Eden" (299).

From this symbolic and allegorical framework, a narrative structure is built through which issues about evolution, instinct, morality, and mass-control are explored. Through these vivisectionist modifications, Moreau tries to make the animals closer to human beings, to "civilize" them; that is, to create them in his own image. Such modifications, therefore, rely on their abandonment of natural animal instincts. To enforce such an abandonment, the creatures are submitted to a series of rules named "the Law", which they themselves internalize and reproduce:

> *"Not to go on all-fours; that is the Law. Are we not Men?*
>
> *"Not to suck up Drink; that is the Law. Are we not Men?*
>
> *"Not to eat Fish or Flesh; that is the Law. Are we not Men?*
>
> *"Not to claw the Bark of Trees; that is the Law. Are we not Men?*
>
> *"Not to chase other Men; that is the Law. Are we not Men?"* (Wells, *Moreau* 114)

There is a striking resemblance between such laws and the Ten Commandments present in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition; a parallel which is reinforced by the secularized Biblical narrative framework within which, as we have mentioned, this narrative is developed. According to Quade, "it seems overtly obvious Wells' text makes this connection blatantly apparent" (296).

These laws, as Quade points out:

> require that they abandon their instinctive, animalistic behavior to feign a more human and controllable nature. The actions these laws forbid are all normal for a wild beast to exhibit, yet in the faith that worships Moreau, they constitute a severe sin. (296)

Therefore, such rules become an instrument of political and social control, employed by both Moreau and Montgomery – the scientist and his partner, the humans who rule the island – in the preservation of their superior status. Prendick – the narrator, who arrives at the island after a shipwreck – readily notices that the animals are superior in number and physical force to both of these humans, so that he asks himself "how these inhuman monsters were kept from falling upon Moreau and Montgomery and from rending one another" (Wells, *Moreau* 132). In a discussion with Montgomery, he learns that their safety was partly due to "the limited mental scope of these monsters" (Wells, *Moreau* 132). However, their security is most firmly ensured by the fact that "they had certain *fixed ideas* implanted by Moreau in their minds" (Wells, *Moreau* 132); and, most importantly, through the existence of a "series of propositions" – the Law – which ensure that they act appropriately even in situations in which their instinct is at conflict with the social codes imposed by the scientist.

Through the introduction of this narrative element, the position of the archetypal mad scientist as a "usurper" of the role of God is strengthened. In fact:

> Part of the process of transforming Dr. Moreau's dismembered beasts into a civilized society and maintaining control over a potentially dangerous conglomeration of disgruntled test-subjects is placing himself on a pedestal for all his "creation" to worship. (Quade 298)

Moreau elevates himself to the position of God, a creator in which the creatures believe in a quasi-mystical way. He is not only seen as a creator, but also as an omnipotent figure of authority which is able to deliver punishment to those who do not act according to the principles and codes of behavior established by the law:

> *"His is the House of Pain.*
>
> *"His is the Hand that makes.*
>
> *"His is the Hand that wounds.*
>
> *"His is the Hand that heals."* (Wells, *Moreau* 114)

The House of Pain constructed by Moreau can be linked, as Quade points out, "to the Hell into which Judeo-Christians believe they would be cast for committing sins or even the Purgatory

where one must "pay" for their sins before being worthy of entering through the gates of Heaven" (298).

Amid this narrative framework, there is a theme which emerges as strongly reinforcing this reading of the story as a secularization of Genesis: that of knowledge and disobedience. Among the laws to which the beasts are submitted, there is one which is charged with special symbolic significance: "*Not to eat Fish or Flesh; that is the Law. Are we not Men?*" (Wells, *Moreau* 114), law to which both Moreau and Montgomery pay special attention: "Both Montgomery and Moreau displayed particular solicitude to keep them ignorant of the taste of blood; they feared the inevitable suggestions of that flavour" (Wells, *Moreau* 133). The submission of the animals' hunting habits and instincts is conceived as essential in their process of becoming "civilized" subjects. The taste of blood, Moreau thinks, would revert the process and bring the beasts back to their instinctive animal status. Thus, the taste of blood would provide them some kind of "knowledge" – particularly, about their evolutionary origins and "real nature" – which would bring about chaos, destruction and death into the island. This way, the theme of blood and de-evolution secularizes the Biblical themes of knowledge and disobedience around which Genesis is structured. The taste of a forbidden "fruit", materialized here through the symbolic rabbits which populate the island, make the subjects acquire a special knowledge which unleashes chaos and death. The animals' insatiable hunger for blood, Quade argues, "can be likened to Eve's insatiable hunger for knowledge and her desire to share said knowledge with Adam which leads humankind into a lifetime of pain, suffering, and death" (300).

It is precisely the fact that some of the animals start hunting rabbits that brings about the collapse of the island's "civilization" and the overthrow of the humans' reign on the island with the death of Moreau. After this overthrow, and the potential threat of a generalized de-evolution and massive chaos, Prendick decides to construct a narrative through which to keep the beasts under control:

> "He is not dead," said I, in a loud voice. "Even now he watches us!" […] "The House of Pain is gone", said I. "It will come again. The Master you cannot see; yet even now he listens among you." […] "I tell you it is so," I said. "The Master and the House of Pain will come again. Woe be to him who breaks the Law!" (Wells, *Moreau* 164)

Through the introduction of this motif, Quade argues:

> Wells mimics the Christian belief that Jesus will return to bring his faithful into eternal bliss and banish all sinners to Hell. In a genius move to protect his own life, Prendick is able to maintain the fear the beasts have of Moreau and the House of Pain despite their destruction. (299)

This secularization, when read within the larger structure of the political and intellectual turmoil around belief and organized religion taking place during the 19th century, allows an analytical approach through which this work emerges as a cultural text reflecting conflicts of its time surrounding religion, like the 19th century religiously shaped morality and its prospects in the face of a potential post-Christian society; the relationship of organized religion with political power structures, or its conception as an instrument of mass-control.

Indeed, this work presents a conflict around the political instrumentalization of belief and fear of punishment as a tool for social mass-control. By secularizing these narratives and motifs, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* lays bare the way in which organized religions work with the belief of individuals in a superior divine entity and the prospect of eternal punishment by instrumentalizing them in order to construct behavioral norms through which to exert political power and maintain a certain status quo.

By replacing the Judeo-Christian figure of God with Moreau and his artificial elevation as a pseudo-divine figure of authority, and by explicitly showing his instrumentalization of belief and his subjects' fear of the House of Pain to maintain his superior position in the island, this work reflects a secular conception of organized religion and its set of morals as a political construct actively engaged in the exercise of political power to ensure the control of the oppressed masses.

The narrative presents a tension and dialectical conflict between the forces of individual instinct, a product of the processes of evolution, and the set of religious laws and morals through which individuals are made "civilized", and through which the political status-quo is maintained. As Quade states, this work can be read as providing an illustration and critique:

> of the institutions of religion that have attempted to control and civilize human beings by forcing them with fear of eternal damnation to adhere to a code of ethics contrary to the naturalistic laws of evolution, and therefore contrary to humankind's natural instinct. (293)

Through the allegorical dimension of this secularization, a link is established between the beast people and Judeo-Christian believers, whose status become conflicted in the light of the new

theories of natural evolution which permeate the ideological structure of this novel. Both of these groups, the text shows us, are subjected to a set of rules which requires them to abandon the behavioral instincts which, in the face of these emerging scientific theories, are seen as the product of the workings of natural evolution; instincts that both of these groups are forced to reject in the face of threats of "eternal damnation".

Nevertheless, identifying this rejection and critique of the instrumentalization of belief and fear of punishment as the only component in this work's latent conflicts would make our analysis incomplete. In fact, this work is highly ambiguous in its underlying ideological configurations.

Apart from this rejection and critique, the tension between the traditional discourses of organized religion and its moral codes, and the new visions of life provided by scientific discoveries of the time also give way to the depiction of a cultural and social anxiety regarding the prospect of western morality and social stability in a potential post-Christian society.

This view is supported by Simkins, who argues that this work outlines the "fundamental importance of universal codes of thought and behavior in human civilization" (43). Wells' science-fictional work, she argues, "acknowledges that, as an intelligent animal, humankind requires mythic narratives to conceptualize its role in the world and inform its behavior within the construct of civilized society" (Simkins 41); a view which also underlies the construction of this seminal novel.

Moreau's law, in this light, is not conceived as a political tool, instrumentalizing belief for the sake of maintaining the status quo. Rather, it is seen a set of "agreed-upon" behavioral codes which ensure the stability of the island's civilization; codes which are supported upon "mythic narratives": Moreau's pseudo-divine status and his House of Pain, through which he is able to turn the beasts into "civilized" beings. This view, when juxtaposed with the one outlined above, makes the underlying ideological configurations of this work, as we have mentioned, highly ambiguous and conflicted.

Indeed, this ambiguity is not only present in a sub-textual level, but can also be identified in the development of the plot itself. After the depiction of the oppressive workings of the Law and the tyrannical nature of Moreau's rule in the island, the end of this novel shifts its focus towards the possible outcomes of the disruption of a society's higher authorities and its associated moral

and behavioral codes, illustrated by the "de-evolution" experienced by the beast people after the death of their masters.

The death of the island's "divine" figure, Moreau, brings about the decline of the authority of the Law: ""Is there a Law now?" asked the Monkey-man. "Is it still to be this and that? Is he dead indeed?" "Is there a Law?" repeated the man in white. "Is there a Law, thou Other with the Whip?"" (Wells, *Moreau* 151). Without the authority of their pseudo-divine figure and his Law, the beasts soon "de-evolve" and re-embrace their natural animal instincts, bringing about the collapse of the island's "civilization".

The novel, in this light, acquires a "Nietzschean" dimension. At the prospect of religion's collapse and decline, it reveals an anxiety about the way in which western moral codes, conceived by Wells to be by then predominantly based on organized religion and its principles, would decline as well. Indeed, and as Simkins notes (43), we observe how there is a clear parallel between the death of Moreau and Friedrich Nietzsche's claim in 1882 that "God is dead" (181). In *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche proclaimed that "the Christian God has become unbelievable […] now that this faith has been undermined […] much must collapse because it was built on this faith […] for example, our entire European morality" (343).

The Island of Doctor Moreau, regardless of whether we place the focus on the oppressive political instrumentalization of belief or the preservation of social stability, works around a central feature, constructed through the secularization of Biblical narratives and tropes and the use of some of the characteristic archetypes of science fiction, which makes this work be charged with and reflect the ideological conflicts and social anxieties brought about by the crisis of faith in the late 19th century: it lays bare religious morality as a set of "agreed-upon" socially-constructed codes working in the modulation of human behavior rather than a product or dictation of the divine.

In fact, the latent ideological concerns surrounding religion present in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* were also explored by this author in his non-fiction. In an article on human evolution published in 1896, Wells argued that:

> "in civilsed man we have (1) an inherited factor, the natural man, who is the product of natural selection, the culminating ape, and a type of animal more obstinately unchangeable than any other living creature;

> and (2) an acquired factor, the artificial man, the highly plastic creature of tradition, suggestion, and reasoned thought". (217)

For Wells, as Simkins argues (42), it is not only Darwinian evolution which determines our nature, but also the social constructs which modulate our behavior and thinking; it is tradition, "in the form of mythic narratives", that shapes what Wells calls the "artificial man". What Wells understands as the "civilised man", therefore, is a social construct, shaped and controlled by the myriad of discourses, fabricated laws and narratives which "inform human understanding".

Morality is an essential component in this process, this novel tells us. But this construction results in oppression when moral codes are in the hands of an organized institution which imposes rules that are employed in the exercise of political power, mass-control, and preservation of the status-quo. Morality, therefore, in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*:

> is behavior decreed not by a higher, divine power on its beloved beings but rather an arbitrary association of those in power— namely, the Church. Morality, as Wells describes it, exists solely for the purpose of controlling the masses, keeping their feral characteristics at bay, and preventing them from rising up against those in power. (Quade 295)

These "agreed-upon" codes of behavior, as we have mentioned, are shown as being employed as instruments of social control, as instruments for the exercise of political power. The identification of power relationships within the narrative structure is essential in the disclosure of the power structures which are reflected and potentially attacked through this secularization. There is a clear and definite power relationship between Moreau and his subjects. He establishes the law not only to keep the peace and harmony of the island's "society", but to maintain himself and Montgomery in a superior position within the island, securing his status of authority and worship through his mischievous conception as a pseudo-divine figure. This, Quade argues, displaces the attack from the Jude-Christian figure of God, directing it into the "possessors of power who could potentially be overthrown by an uprising of the masses" (298).

These latent conflicts are reinforced in the ending, when Prendick elevates Moreau further into the likeness of the mystical and omnipotent Judeo-Christian God and exploits the beasts' belief in this transcendence as a way of ensuring control of their instincts. Without this pseudo-divine figure and the prospect of punishment for those who do not act in accordance with the Law, the beast people are able to recover their animal instincts, being liberated from the rules of, as

Quade says, "a falsely constructed religion" (299); something which lays bare the way in which organized religions exploit their believers' faith in a superior divine entity in watch of human deeds as a way to "maintain their stronghold over the weak that trust them".

However, parallel to this disclosure and attack is the prospect of a social order without these codes of behavior, codes which were, in late 19th-century England, still strictly shaped after and determined by the laws and dictates of organized Christianity. Without these laws and its sustaining narratives, the island's social stability collapses; a fact which dramatizes Wells' conviction that:

> In the artificial man we have all that makes the comforts and securities of civilization a possibility. That factor and civilization have developed, and will develop together. And in this view, what we call Morality becomes the padding of suggested emotional habits necessary to keep the round Palaeolithic savage in the square hole of the civilized state. And Sin is the conflict of the two factors–as I have tried to convey in my *Island of Dr. Moreau*. ("Human Evolution" 217)

Therefore, in the text, religion's instrumentalization of belief results in social oppression, through the establishment of politically employed codes of behavior which ensure the survival of the status-quo; but the prospect of its decline brings about the possibility of social collapse. "Neither Christianity nor science and rationalism", as Sanders claims, "seems satisfying answer to a deep and urgent desire for meaning and truth" (32).

The text does not align itself firmly with either of these positions: it targets religion as an oppressive institution which instrumentalizes falsely constructed beliefs, but also displays a fear about the prospect of western civilization if religion – and its morals with it – disappear. This novel, therefore, as Simkins argues:

> illuminates the dilemma faced by Wells' society. Nineteenth-century science had presented a new vision of life on Earth and, in dismissing traditional religion, created the need for new, socially beneficial mythic systems. (43)

Despite the apparent dissimilarity between both of these dimensions of the underlying ideological configurations of this text, both share an essential core. *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, in these analyses, emerges as a fictional work which is deeply intertwined with the political and epistemological conflicts of its time surrounding organized religion and faith.

Apocalypse: *The War of the Worlds*

Another of the particular Christian narratives which were adopted and secularized by Wells in the construction of his science-fictional plots was that of Apocalypse.

As we observe in David Seed's study of religious and secular reproductions of Apocalyptic narratives, and as it was the case with rewriting of creation stories, Wells' manipulations of this Biblical narrative are part of a wider literary "tradition" of Biblical rewritings and secularizations. In fact, Apocalyptic narratives were common to Wells' contemporaries, and proliferated during the 19th century, with examples such as Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), Edgar Allan Poe's "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion" (1839), or Richard Jefferies's *After London* (1885).

Apocalyptic narratives, Seed shows, have often been interpreted both by literary authors and scholars as a literary mode which enables different forms of speculative inquiry. When D.H. Lawrence asks "[w]hat does Apocalypse matter, unless in so far as it gives us imaginative release into another vital world? After all, what meaning *has* the Apocalypse? For the ordinary reader, not much" (126); he is in fact, Seed claims, paving the way for the claim that Apocalypse "does matter because it gives us access to a near-defunct symbolistic mode of thought whose rediscovery can re-energize the individual's relation to the cosmos" (1). Frank Kermode, Seed argues, showed that "[t]he notion of an ending […] does have the appeal of rescuing us from the ultimate nightmare of endless, undifferentiated duration" (qtd. in Seed 3). J.G. Ballard argued that these kinds of narratives "have the positive role of describing our confrontation with the 'terrifying void of a patently meaningless universe'" (qtd. in Seed 8).

Despite the diverse nature of such tradition, it is precisely in the science-fiction genre that we observe, as Edward James expounds, a most clear picture about the influence of this religious narrative within the literary tradition. As this author explains, when discussing upon the "progenitors" of science fiction, authors like Homer, Plato, or Jonathan Swift are usually cited. Nevertheless, he claims that "no-one in print, as far as I know, perhaps out of misplaced reverence, has suggested St John of Patmos, the author of the Book of Revelation" (45). Yet, E. James states:

> he is one of the most widely quoted and influential of all writers on the future: the symbolic creator of a prophetic tradition that has influenced much more secular approaches to speculation about the future, and his Book survives to this day as an influential and powerful way of imagining the future. (45)

Given the influence which this Book has exerted upon secular literary speculation, we find profound similarities between science-fictional approaches to Apocalypse and the tales of the Book of Revelation.

Nevertheless, as this author points out (45), the relationship between both approaches presents a central discrepancy, due to the different scientific outlooks of the times in which these narratives were originated. Christian approaches to Apocalypse, even in 20th-century literature, are usually based on a geocentric perspective, consisting of the end of Earth or human civilization as a product of God's will; something which reflects the "pre-Copernican" vision of the world in which the Judeo-Christian Apocalyptic narrative was developed.

Science-fictional approaches to this narrative, in contrast, often conceive of Apocalypse without this geocentric outlook, presenting it as a destruction of the entire universe, in what we could call a "reversal" of the Big Bang which originated it. When approaching the tradition of science-fictional secularizations of this narrative, therefore, we should take into account this essential division.

Nevertheless, despite such contradiction, both visions do converge in science-fictional stories in which the focus is on the death of the Earth or human civilization, rather than the destruction of the entire universe. Although they operate on radically different cosmological scales and they conceive the end of all things as an essentially different phenomenon:

> Biblical apocalypse is much more frequently recalled in science fiction in the stories of catastrophe on earth, when human civilisation is wiped out either by natural causes- by plague, or collision with an asteroid - or by its own actions - some scientific experiment that goes wrong or, most commonly, catastrophic war. (E. James 52)

Such is precisely the literary space within which Wells develops some of his science-fictional works. In some of his texts, among which *The War of the Worlds* (1898) emerges as a central cornerstone, the Apocalyptic narrative is secularized through stories which maintain this geocentric outlook; stories which deal with the end of Earth or human civilization.

These secularizations have been approached by literary critics, but most often in terms of a disclosure of authorial thought and intentions; particularly in relation to Wells' political views and programs. Patrick Parrinder states that "[t]ime and again, Wells would draw upon the religious imagery of the end of the world in his search for a language powerful enough, and urgent enough, to convey his sense of human frailty and human destiny" (73). Similarly, Simon J. James argues that this author "frequently makes use of Judaeo-Christian tropes of the end of the world", which make his stories function as "an apocalyptic revelation, in the hope that his audience might be shocked into grasping the 'truths' of his political programme of universal education and a utopian World State"; so that his manipulation of this Biblical narrative becomes "a way of dramatizing his own personal convictions" (459).

His 1906 novel *In the Days of the Comet* is a clear example of this fact. In this work, Wells makes use of an apocalyptic narrative – reduced in this case to an apocalyptic threat – in order to construct a utopian work in which he forwards his social and political convictions. In this novel, the apocalyptic threat posed by a slowly approaching comet results in utopian speculation, as it dissolves in contact with the atmosphere, liberating gases which, when breathed, produce a change in human beings, bringing about what comes to be known as "The Change": the construction of a utopian society through which Wells manages to dramatize his political programs.

Indeed, as we outlined in our introduction, when exploring Biblical elements and rewritings in literary works of the 19th century, it must be taken into account that, given the widespread familiarity of popular audiences with Biblical narratives during this period, authors found in them effective ways of connecting with their readership; and even, as Parrinder and S.J. James argue, spreading their social, political or moral messages.

Nevertheless, there is a dimension opened by some of his secularizations of Apocalypse which surpasses these questions and requires them to be investigated in relation to the religious turmoil unleashed – particularly – in the late 19th century: through his manipulation of this Biblical narrative, Wells created works which feature latent ideological conflicts associated with the conflicting discourses of science and theology and their struggles for becoming the hegemonic authoritative discourse in the explanation of reality.

These works secularize the Apocalyptic narrative, as we have outlined, as they deprive it of the presence of divine forces in the outbreak of catastrophe, destruction and extinction; forces which are replaced with secular aesthetics like a Martian invasion or an asteroid collision, and scientific discourse, displacing traditional religious interpretations of Apocalypse as inadequate and reference to the divine as unnecessary. Essential in this process is the interplay and dialectic conflict between the discourses of science and religion. Such interplay is characteristic of the tradition of science-fictional secularizations of religious narratives, in which, as E. James states, there are often "interactions between what we might see as rival eschatologies" (45).

One the works in which we find this kind of secularization is the short story "The Star" (1897). This story chronicles the events following the appearance of an increasingly brightly shining "star", which ends up being identified as an approaching asteroid threatening apocalyptic destruction. Although here Apocalypse is not consummated and is presented just as a potential threat, such threat allows for the juxtaposition of the conflicting discourses of science and theology.

The apocalyptic threat is framed in this story within a scientific discourse through which the agency of divine forces is discarded. Astronomy is, in this case, the provider of a discursive framework through which the narrator describes the event as a secular phenomenon:

> It was on the first day of the New Year that the announcement was made, almost simultaneously from three observatories, that the motion of the planet Neptune, the outermost of all the planets that wheeled about the sun, had become very erratic. Ogilvy had already called attention retardation in its velocity in December. Such a piece of news was scarcely calculated to interest the world the greater portion of whose inhabitants were unaware of the existence of the planet Neptune, nor outside the astronomical profession did the subsequent discovery of a faint remote speck of light in the region of the perturbed planet cause any great excitement.
>
> Scientific people, however, found the intelligence remarkable enough, even before it became known that the new body was rapidly growing larger and brighter, that its motion was quite different from the orderly progress of the planets, and that the deflection of Neptune and its satellite was becoming now of an unprecedented kind. (Wells, "Star" 243)

However, the apocalyptic threat is put in juxtaposition with the religious component, creating a tension between discourses in their struggle for becoming the hegemonic authority in the explanation of reality:

> And everywhere the world was awake that night, and throughout Christendom a somber murmur hung in the keen air over the countryside like the buzzing of the bees in the heather, and this murmurous tumult grew to a clangor in the cities. It was the tolling of the bells in a million belfry towers and steeples, summoning the people to sleep no more, to sin no more, but to gather in their churches and pray. And overhead, growing larger and brighter, as the earth rolled on its way and the night passed, rose the dazzling star. (Wells, "Star" 244)

It is, nevertheless, in the secularization of Apocalypse carried out in *The War of the Worlds* (1898) that latent conflicts around religion can be identified more explicitly and seen more clearly as influential for the construction of the plot. By making use of the aesthetics of extraterrestrial invasion, this narrative is stripped of the forces of divine intervention; forces which are replaced with the laws of natural evolution, scientific discourse, and the Social Darwinist notion of the "survival of the fittest".

The narrative voice, which is that of the main character, is marked by its delivery of a scientific and secular discourse which, even before the description of the actual course of the invasion, provides a framework which frontally collides with religious conceptions of Apocalypse, the agency of divine forces, and its relation to human sin.

The novel begins with the narrator's retrospective account of how human conceptions of their predilect place in the universe were shaken and proved wrong by the Martian invasion. Although evolution is not explicitly mentioned within such initial discourse, as Sherryl Vint suggests:

> the opening is organized around readjusting our sense of time to encompass a vastness that far exceeds recorded human history, just as new discoveries in geology and paleontology were confronting Wells's contemporaries with the realization that the planet's life had existed long before humanity. (20)

Scientific observation is also presented as an essential factor in these new emerging conceptions, with the use of an analogy which links human's study of "inferior" organisms and Martians' scrutiny of Earth prior to the outbreak of the invasion:

> as men busied themselves about their affairs they were scrutinized and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinize the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. (Wells, *Worlds* 9).

The narrator's scientific and secular discourse, from the outset of the novel, presents a conflict towards religious conceptions of humanity and its relation to the universe. In these opening paragraphs, we observe how Christian anthropocentrism, its idea of humanity as the predilect creation of God, is exposed. Humanity is presented as simply one among a myriad of other species, made "ruler" in Earth by the forces of evolution, but probably inferior in the face of other beings which may populate the universe. This shifting worldview is realized not only through this introduction of conflicting discourses, but also through the subversion of the narrative conventions of realist fiction. Wells, in parallel to this rejection of the idea of humanity as the central being in existence, and as Vint notes (22), creates a narrative which does not privilege human beings as the driving force of the action, presenting a narrator who is merely a spectator, who just describes some events in which the real agents are the Martians.

Scientific discourse, therefore, provides a secular framework through which the Apocalyptic threat - understood here in geocentric terms as in its Biblical origins - unleashed by the arrival of the Martians is understood without the necessity of any reference to higher divine forces. Rather, the events are deemed comprehensible primarily through reference to the laws of evolution, the laws of astronomy which account for the cooling of Mars, the reason for the Martians' search of a place to inhabit; and by the fact of technological development, which provides the Martians with the military superiority through which to colonize Earth.

Nevertheless, such a framework and outlook, provided by a narrative voice whose reliability and authority are not absolute due to its link to character subjectivity and perspective, do not go uncontested. Near the end of the first book of the novel, the character of the curate is introduced, element through which both discourses are set in dialectical confrontation. Despite the purely secular nature of the events which we have discussed so far, this character introduces an outlook in which he interprets the secular Apocalypse through the scope of traditional Christian eschatology.

From the first contact between the curate and the narrator, this character introduces a discourse in which Christian narratives are used in order to find intelligibility in the catastrophic events in which they are immersed.

"'What does it mean?' […] 'What do these things mean?'" (Wells, *Worlds* 63) the curate desperately asks. While the narrator provides at the outset of the story a retrospective account, with access to data from after the events which enable him to provide rationalized explanations

of the causes of the invasion, the curate is depicted and described in the process of actively seeking his own way of rationalizing the events, for which he recurs to his religious belief and its narratives; thus trying to impose a meaning to the invasion based on the notions of sin and Divine Punishment with a language which draws heavily from the Book of Revelations:

> 'Why are these things permitted? What sins have we done? The morning service was over, I was walking through the roads to clear my brain for the afternoon, and then—fire, earthquake, death! As if it were Sodom and Gomorrah!* All our work undone, all the work—— What are these Martians?' (Wells, *Worlds* 63)

The curate's speech is set in tension and direct confrontation to the already constructed secular and scientific framework through which the events are interpreted as the product of the convergence of a series of facts in which the agency or presence of divine forces is discarded.

Through the juxtaposition of this secular and scientific framework and the curate's fervent religious speech, his interpretation of the events is depicted as an "irrational" impulse, product of his lack of knowledge and the overwhelming nature of the anxiety brought about by the invasion. The narrator, in fact, in the light of such discourse, readily categorizes this character as someone driven "mad" by the magnitude of the catastrophes he has witnessed:

> By this time I was beginning to take his measure. The tremendous tragedy in which he had been involved—it was evident he was a fugitive from Weybridge—had driven him to the very verge of his reason. (Wells, *Worlds* 64)

The dialectical conflict between rival discourses is thus materialized within the plot through a progressive confrontation between both characters, which ends up with the curate being murdered by the narrator, in a moment when, both hidding from the Martians inside a house, he threatens to reveal their position in a nervous breakdown. From such discursive confrontation, unleashed by the secularization of this Biblical narrative, as we can observe, this work reflects an ongoing conflict for the hegemony as the authoritative discourse in the explanation of the workings of reality.

Through the introduction of the curate and his religious interpretation of a secularized Biblical narrative, this work opens a space through which religion and its narratives are depicted as a pragmatic response to anxieties and the need for intelligibility in the face of the unknown and incomprehensible, rather than actual viable and objective ways of conceiving and understanding the universe and its workings. In fact, as Karen Morris claims, we can understand

the use of this character as "a metaphor for the church's inability to handle the new millennium" (6).

However, despite the fact that these characters "materialize" the dialectical confrontation between these conflicting discourses, we cannot readily categorize the narrator as a symbolic representative of atheistic or agnostic thought, due to his sustained belief in God throughout the narrative progression. In fact, such sustained belief introduces an ambiguity by which his final assessments of the events end up being set in confrontation with the secular framework which is built through his own narration.

In a moment when all human defenses seem to have been proven worthless in the face of the Martians' military superiority, they unexpectedly perish due to the contact with bacteria for which their organism is not prepared, due to their lack of previous exposure to them in their own planet. In the face of such sudden and "far-fetched" event, the narrator resorts to religious conceptions of reality as a way of finding intelligibility:

> And scattered about it, some in their overturned war-machines, some in the now rigid handling- machines, and a dozen of them stark and silent and laid in a row, were the Martians— *dead*!—slain by the putrefactive and disease bacteria against which their systems were unprepared; slain as the Red Weed was being slain; slain, after all man's devices had failed, by the humblest things that God, in His wisdom, has put upon this earth. (Wells, *Worlds* 149)

His sudden embrace of creationism clashes with the secular framework – based upon the principles of Darwinian evolutionism – which he himself constructs throughout the story, and around which the narrative works. In fact, even at this point he still makes use of evolutionary discourse in order to account for the fact of the distinct sensibility towards terrestrial bacteria between humans and Martians:

> A cankering disease, due, it is believed, to the action of certain bacteria, presently seized upon it. Now by the action of natural selection, all terrestrial plants have acquired a resisting power against bacterial diseases—they never succumb without a severe struggle; but the Red Weed rotted like a thing already dead. The fronds became bleached, and then shrivelled and brittle. They broke off at the least touch, and the waters that had stimulated their early growth carried their last vestiges out to sea. (Wells, *Worlds* 130)

The narrator, in the face of this far-fetched contingency, finds the need to resort to the transcendent. The secular understanding of the events forwarded by scientific discourse forces him to deny the idea of inherent meanings and higher schemes, to conceive of his salvation as

a sheer coincidence, a product of the independent workings of the laws of nature, which are inherently purposeless, not active and conscious agents in the preservation of humanity as a predilect being. In the face of this fact, he manages to "merge" these conflicting worldviews, accepting the agency of the independent workings of Nature, while maintaining his faith in the divine, which helps him to avoid the idea of a radical contingency in reality and human existence.

Thus, while *The War of the Worlds*, as Vint claims, "allies itself firmly with science in the ongoing battle between scientific and religious authority" (24), it does not provide a picture of a "flat linear" conflict between mutually exclusive discourses, but rather portrays the crisis of faith as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, in which there existed a reticence around the insecurity of conceiving existence – for the first time in centuries – as devoid of inherent meanings, as not governed by higher divine schemes.

Through the construction of this intellectual ambiguity, this work aligns itself with a key tenet of Nietzschean philosophy, as explained by Terry Eagleton:

> What Nietzsche recognises is that you can get rid of God only if you also do away with innate meaning. The Almighty can survive tragedy, but not absurdity. As long as there appears to be some immanent sense to things, one can always inquire after the source from which it springs. Abolishing given meanings involves destroying the idea of depth, which in turn means rooting out beings like God who take shelter there. (155)

Thus, as we can observe, the secularization of Apocalypse and its featured tensions between conflicting narratives and discourses was common to some of Wells' science-fictional works. In fact, such conflict was also a subject of his non-fiction. In *The Outline of History* (1920), he gave an account of such conflict in terms that conform to the analysis we have carried out, and which sheds light on the intellectual ambiguity introduced at the closure of *The War of the Worlds*:

> The Darwinian movement took formal Christianity unawares, suddenly. Formal Christianity was confronted with a clearly demonstrable error in her theological statements. The Christian theologians were neither wise enough nor mentally nimble enough to accept the new truth, modify their formulæ, and insist upon the living and undiminished vitality of the religious reality those formulæ had hitherto sufficed to express. . . .It was the orthodox theology that the new scientific advances had compromised, but the angry theologians declared that it was religion. (Wells, *Outline* 956)

For Wells, conflicts upon discursive authority were not to be understood as direct attacks on religious belief, but only on the religious "grand narratives" that tried to account for the nature and workings of reality; narratives which, these texts show us, were perceived to be about to be replaced by the theories and discourses of natural science.

Some of Wells' science-fictional works featuring a secularization of the Apocalyptic narrative, as we have observed, feature a discursive tension which informs us about these conflicts and shows us how late 19th-century speculative artistic production was linked, to a certain extent, to the social and intellectual turmoil surrounding religious faith and its narratives; portraying the Victorian crisis of faith as a determinant cultural force in the shaping of new literary modes and their particular aesthetic and narrative configurations. This way, science fiction emerges as the literary mode of the progressively building "immanent frame" which, as Taylor argues, characterizes modernity. As Simkins claims:

> SF developed as a response to the changing world of the nineteenth century and engages with the wide range of discourses that inform contemporary society. This means that the estranged settings of SF narratives are built on the reality that we know and, therefore, incorporate the myriad philosophies that exist in the modern world. (10)

Contemporary society, after the decline of religious hegemony, as this author notes (12), "is informed by a range of mythic types, including scientific theories, religious doctrines, political ideologies […]"; among which we find science fiction, "which produces new myths that incorporate and rework all other mythic forms"; a fact for which our analyses offer illustrative examples.

Conclusion

As we have observed throughout these analyses, some of Wells' science-fictional works are informed by their intertextual connections with the Bible. More specifically, by the way they secularize Biblical narratives and tropes, by stripping them out of the presence and agency of divine forces, which are replaced by the discourses of natural science, the laws of evolution, causality and chance.

Taking advantage of the new literary space opened in the 19th century, in which the novel was "enchanted" and transformed with the introduction of supernatural elements, Wells managed to develop works which secularized narratives as Apocalypse and Genesis through the inclusion

of innovative aesthetics, archetypes and tropes which have come to influence heavily the development of the science-fiction genre until our days, such as mad scientists or extraterrestrial invasions.

These secularizations can be explained, as we have discussed, by the fact that Wells – as other authors in this tradition – found in Judeo-Christian imagery, narratives and tropes effective means of constructing his stories and even conveying his social, political and moral messages in familiar forms for an audience which was, as S.J. James notes, "still predominantly Judaeo-Christian in belief" (469).

Nevertheless, the interaction between these Biblical elements and Wells' secular aesthetics and narrative features also give way to underlying ideological tensions and conflicts which make these works emerge as influenced by the religious unrest which, as we have discussed, characterized the – especially mid and late – Victorian period.

On the one hand, the secularization of Genesis and other Christian tropes carried out in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* makes this work emerge as engaging in diverse issues concerning morality, like its prospect in a potential post-Christian society, or the political instrumentalization of belief and fear of punishment it entails. By substituting the figure of God with the archetypal mad scientist and creation with the "evolutionary boost" of Moreau's vivisections, Wells lays bare the way in which organized religious institutions impose behavioral norms which go against the natural impulses which are the product of the workings of evolution, as well as how these impositions are used as means for the exercise of political power and the maintenance of a particular status-quo, preventing the uprising of the oppressed masses.

Nevertheless, at the same time, this work provides at the end a dramatization of the Nietzschean "death of God" and the subsequent collapse of the edifice of morality, which is portrayed as causing the disintegration of "civilization" (in this case, the stability of the island), communicating the "fundamental importance of universal codes of thought and behavior in human civilization" (Simkins 43).

In those works which secularize Apocalypse – among which *The War of the Worlds* emerges as the cornerstone–, on the other hand, this secularization leads to a tension between traditional Christian eschatology and scientific secular discourse, which paints a picture about the conflicts

taking place during this period for rising up as the hegemonic authoritative discourse in the explanation of reality.

In *The War of the Worlds*, this conflict is "materialized" through the disputes between the narrator and the curate and their respective worldviews; being the secular and scientific outlook the one with which this text is firmly aligned. A view which, nevertheless, becomes ambiguous when we find out, at the end, that the narrator retains his belief in God; a belief he makes explicit when he witnesses the far-fetched contingency which brings about salvation.

In the face of the loss of authority of Christian grand narratives, Wells constructs an exploration of human subjectivity when deprived of these overarching narratives, without which the human subject is depicted as unable to make sense of the workings of a highly contingent reality, a reality ungoverned by higher divine schemes, laws or wills; unable to accept that, as the text makes explicit, it is not divine intervention that brings about the demise of the Martians, but the independent workings of the natural world and chance; which render religious narratives which attempt to conceptualize or provide an ulterior cause to these workings as human constructions in our attempt to deny the potential existentialist and nihilistic drives which might result from the acceptance of these radical contingencies.

In short, we observe how, through these secularizations, some of Wells' science-fictional works and their aesthetic and narrative configurations emerge as both informed by and informants of the groundbreaking phenomenon of the Victorian crisis of faith. We can also observe, however, how the works of this author are highly ambiguous and conflicted in their portrayal of this social and intellectual turmoil. Wells paints a vision of the crisis of faith as a highly complex and multifaceted phenomenon, which entails the deconstruction of modes of thought and social organization which had, until that moment in history, been central foundational pillars of the western world.

While his works portray science as a central factor for the construction of a utopian future and the world as devoid of divine forces, schemes or laws; and align themselves firmly "with science in the ongoing battle between scientific and religious authority (Vint 24), they do not provide a vision of history as "a progressive march of reason, wherein we lose the childish illusions of religion as we acquire adult knowledge of reality" (Lyons 124). Rather, they show an awareness – and anxiety – of the consequences and conflicts which could arise from a complete demise of religious belief, its authority and its grand narratives for a world still

predominantly religious; given the fact that it had until then been the edifice upon which western morality had rested, as well as the source of our metaphysical understanding of reality.

These ideas might seem as not being particularly relevant for the contemporary reader and his or her present-day sensibilities. However, they are insofar as they illustrate the way in which the religious question was originally influential in the development of some of the seminal works of the science-fictional tradition and their characteristic features. Science fiction, a genre so central to our contemporary culture, was engendered in a time of turbulent changes and conflicts, especially in the religious sphere; so that some of the narratives, aesthetics, tropes and archetypes which have come to define it and mark its development were once informed and even determined by the intellectual conflicts and re-configurations that the western world was experiencing at the time.

Mad scientists, as we have observed, were once conceived as substitutes of divine figures, through which, with their stories of creation, authors carried out speculative inquiries, as Wells with his exploration of our forms of social organization and the role played by organized religion. In the same way, stories of apocalypse and extraterrestrial invasion were once conceived as substitutes of the cleansing of Earth by God's will announced in the Bible, through which authors as Wells managed to pose metaphysical questions about the nature of reality, the existence of the divine and its interventions, as well as about the ways in which we conceptualize existence once we are deprived of the grand narratives of Christianity.

These parallel stories of beginnings and endings have not stopped being central to the science-fictional tradition, and they definitely have not lost their speculative potential, their capacity to reflect the issues which concern us in every moment of our collective history; to illustrate the questions that we most fervently ask ourselves. Stories of apocalypse and apocalyptic threat have remained extensively present in this tradition; in fact, we can even observe how *The War of the Worlds* itself, through many adaptations, has remained present in our cultural landscape. These adaptations include recent productions such as Howard Overman's 2019 adaptation, or Craig Viveiros' 2019 adaptation, which offers an alternative exploration of the question of faith.

Also, we have recently witnessed a proliferation of stories of creation; most notably of human-like artificial intelligences, present in works such as Alex Garland's 2015 film *Ex Machina*, which features a renewed version of the archetypal (mad) scientist; or Ian McEwan's novel

Machines Like Me (2019), a book which also draws from Biblical language, especially in its naming of these artificial beings as Adam and Eve. These creation stories share and reflect a common central concern which has come to be identified, as Nicole Timmer notes, as characteristic of our contemporary culture and artistic production: a deep humanistic exploration, a concern about what it means to be human (13), constructed in this case through the juxtaposition of human and machine, mind and computer, through which authors explore the deepest corners of our own selves.

Given the sustained influence and recurrence of traditional elements and narratives like the ones we have explored, it becomes apparent that, if we want to fully understand this tradition, with its narratives, archetypes and tropes, there is a need to look back at the Victorians, at the ways in which they drew from diverse literary, religious and mythological traditions to construct texts of this emerging genre; as well as at the social and intellectual conflicts, re-configurations, utopian visions and anxieties which once permeated these innovative artistic productions. There is, in fact, if we want to understand our world, a need to understand the Victorians' intellectual and social landscape, which was the site of some of the changes which have come to define our contemporary world and culture.

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